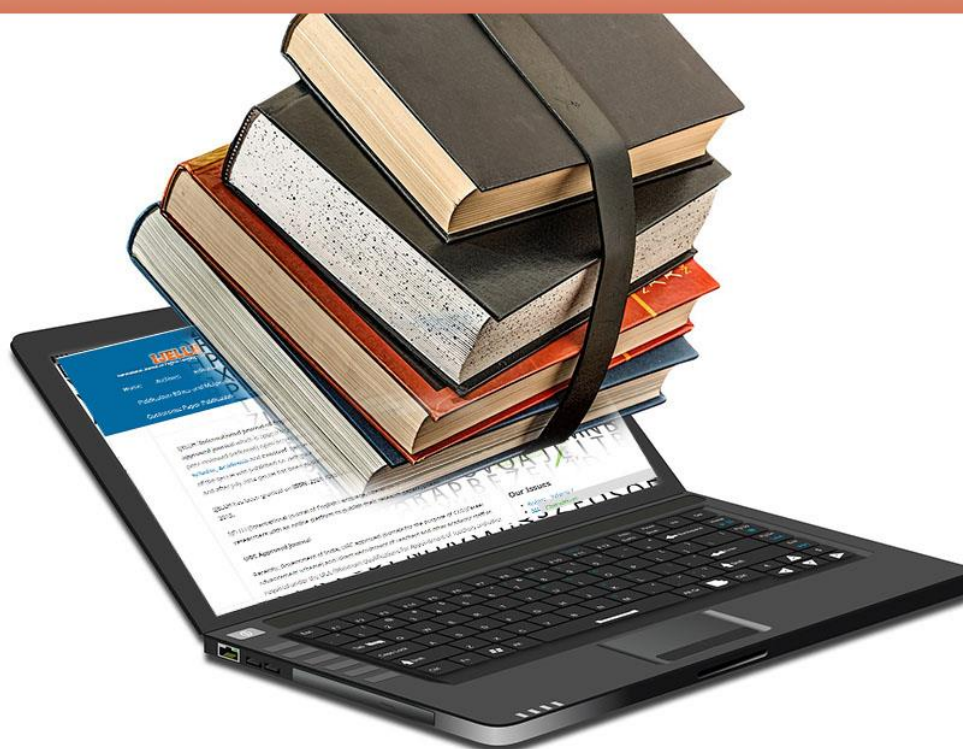


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A Reflection of the Fractured Indian Society in Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others*

Abstract

The independent nation India and its leaders have failed to fulfill the promises and hopes given to the people during the independence movement. Even after freedom, the poverty and other ills have continued without much change. This has led to disenchantment among the people and this has given rise to movements like Naxalbari. Neel Mukherjee tries to capture the facets of the fractured Indian society through his second novel *The Lives of Others*, which has been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2014. He draws parallels between the fragmented society and the decaying joint family of the Ghoshes. It very poignantly mixes the politics of nation and the politics of family. It portrays the despair of the downtrodden and the confusions of the intellectuals in the fast changing society.

Key Words:

fractured society, alienation, abject poverty, angst and despair

Introduction

Neel Mukherjee entered the literary realm with the novel *Past Continuous* which was the winner of Vodafone-Crossword Award along with Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* in the year 2008. Mukherjee was born in 1970 and he currently lives in London. His second novel, *The Lives of Others*, for which he was awarded Encore Award, is an in-depth treatment of the dark side of Indian society. His third novel *A State of Freedom* was published in 2018. Though Neel Mukherjee has produced only three works, they have the quality to merit serious study. All the three novels deal with the predicament and confusions of an intellectual in India. Alienation is a major theme in all his works.

The novel *The Lives of Others* delineates the complex problems of the Indian society in the era of modernization and liberalization. It focuses on the injustices inherent in the system. Neel Mukherjee uses bi-polar narrative technique in the novel. One narrative in the third person deals with the degeneration of a joint family of the Ghoshes and the second narrative in the first person describes the abject poverty in the society and the resultant crises. The author traverses narrative modes masterfully and the disintegrating family is dexterously used to represent the Indian society that is falling apart. A review of the book by Goodreads praises, "Ambitious, rich, and compassionate, *The Lives of Others* anatomizes the soul of a nation as it unfolds a family history, at the same time as it questions the nature of political action and the limits of empathy. It is a novel of unflinching power and emotional force." The novel is set partly in Calcutta and partly in Medinipur and the Naxalite movement and the fractured family are used as backdrops.

The Lives of Others deals with the relatively unexplored domain of the sufferings of the downtrodden in independent India. The novel begins with a harrowing scene which describes

the suicide of Nitai Das after killing his family. Nitai Das is a starving Bengali peasant in the remote area of West Bengal. He is not able to feed his wife and three children. With frustration mounted for months, he finally decides to release his family from “this world of misery, of endless, endless misery.” (2) He slaughters his wife and children with a sickle and then commits suicide. This is not the plight of Nitai alone, but all small peasants and farm labourers face the same plight. For farm labourers like Kanu while working in the fields of the landlords, “even breathing seems a luxury.” (150) The illiterate low-caste peasants are cheated by the jotedars in collusion with the officials and are denied bare minimum wages. Marx says that in a capitalist society, workers never become autonomous, self-realized human beings in any significant sense; except in the way the bourgeoisie wants the worker to be realized. The same is true of the farmers in the semi-feudal and semi-colonial India. The farmers lose their autonomy and become puppets in the hands of market economy. Thus they are alienated where they lose their true existence in the struggle for subsistence. This results in angst and despair and this is clearly visible when Nitai Das brutally kills his family before committing suicide.

The author also effectively exposes the ill-effects of the economic policies which increase the gulf between the rich and the poor. He describes the grandeur of the Great Eastern Hotel. The graveled drive, the blue swimming pool, the stone and marble and glass of the building, the gardens, the well-tended lawns make people slack-jawed with awe. Outside the hotel on the pavements are a row of men with torn and worn-out vests and lungis sleeping on the jute sacks and curled up like fetuses to escape from the cold weather. The author very poignantly comments,

Only ten feet separate them from the world of extreme wealth. Inside-outside: the world forever and always divides into those two categories.

Inside, the amount of water used daily to keep the lawns and gardens so lush

could provide drinking water to each of these men for a month. Outside these men have to walk miles sometimes to get a public hand-pump. On the way, if they collapse of thirst, even dogs won't piss into their mouths to slake their dried tongues and throats. (32)

The description exposes the true face of India's proud discourse of development. The poor are deprived of their basic rights and are forced to live in abject poverty. The imbalance between the two worlds alienates the have-nots and fills their minds with an unhappy consciousness. The alienation caused by the liberal economic policies creates a sense of disorientation and disillusionment with the independent nation. The peasants and the other oppressed feel alien and uprooted in their own land. Neel Mukherjee also hints that the rulers of independent India have let the subaltern down.

The ghastly socio-economic conditions, mal administration, failure of the system to deliver goods and the perceived injustice lead to the Naxalite movement. Naxalites fill the vacuum created by the politicians and the bureaucrats. They support the lower caste peasants who are subjected to the atrocities by the landlords and their ideology appeals to the downtrodden. Naxalite movement started as a small movement in the village of Naxalbari situated in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal in 1960s under the leadership of Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal. Its ideology is based on the principles of Marxism, Leninism and Maoism. The aim is to undermine the state and seize power. In the late 1960s it ignited a fire also in the hearts of the urban youth. The naxalite movement brought a powerful wave of ideologies developing a spirit of enquiry and critique of the system. Many young men, especially students, living in that most turbulent period of the late sixties in Calcutta, are attracted towards this extremist movement. The protagonist of *The Lives of Others* Supratik is one among them. He is a student of Presidency College, a hot bed of communist activities. Despite his upper middle-class background, he shows apathy towards the poor and the abject

poverty shocks him. He does not like his family members enjoying themselves while others are rotting. He questions his mother, "Don't you ever think that we have too much, and others have too little? Take, for example, the Food Revolution agitation going on outside our four walls: do they affect us in any way?" (79) His mother doubts he is getting involved in 'red politics.' He also expresses his dissatisfaction with the exploitation in his family. He demands that Purba's children be given more food. He goes to Mednipur with Saamir and Dhiren to educate the peasants and make them prepared for an armed uprising and leads a secretive life. He tries to take up various underground activities. The author takes us to the heart of darkness when he describes the vicious cycle of violence and counter-violence. The author is highly critical of naxals and their senseless violence. He also censures the violent termination of naxals by the police. The Bengali society of 1967 has witnessed state repression and terror. There are numerous reports of Amnesty International on the custodial violence. People are mercilessly killed by the police which is clearly depicted in *Mother of 1084* by Mahasweta Devi. The ideological rejection of judicial system and the resultant violence of both the sides shows the deepening social crisis. Supratik's journey into the rural India and his attempts to change the society culminate in frustration and disappointment. He suffers from social alienation-from the people and his colleagues in the movement because of his class and social background. The term alienation comes from the [Latin](#) *alienus* which meant 'of another place or person', which in turn came from *alius*, meaning "other" or "another". Supratik feels he is the 'other.' His alienation is also due to a sense of powerlessness. Kalekin-Fishman says, "A person suffers from alienation in the form of 'powerlessness' when she is conscious of the gap between what she would like to do and what she feels capable of doing". He is disillusioned with the blind imitation of the leaders of Mao Zedong. He often wonders if he is considered an outsider and ultimately remains an unaccommodated alien.

Supratik has joined the Naxalite movement partly to escape the suffocating life at home. This is evident from the note he has left for his mother before leaving the home. The note reads,

Ma, I feel exhausted with consuming, with taking and grabbing and using. I am so bloated that I feel I cannot breathe any more. I am leaving to find some air, some place where I shall be able to purge myself, push back against the life given me and make my own. I feel I lived in a borrowed house. It's time to find my own.(60)

Neel Mukherjee considers family the microcosm of the Indian society. It is well known fact that family is strength of Indian society and it has continued over ages. It plays a dominant role in the life of an individual as well as the community. But with the advent of modernization and westernization the joint family structure is slowly disintegrating. The decaying Indian family is delineated through the terrain of upper middle-class family living in Bhowanipur, Calcutta. The author provides a family tree and a guide to the family relations in the novel. Patriarch Prafullanath with his wife Charubala, their five children and their spouses and offsprings live in a mansion on 22/6 Basanta Bose Road. It is an extended family with three married sons Adinath, Priyonath and Bholanath and one unmarried daughter Chhaya. Their youngest child Somnath has passed away and his widow Purba and two children live in the same house. The habitation of the house itself shows the hierarchy with the patriarch living on the top floor and others on the remaining floors according to their status in the family. Through the frictions in the domestic sphere, the author highlights the fractured society and presents the vision of bleakness. His observant eye never misses the minutest details of the happenings in the family. Amitav Ghosh in a review of the novel posted on his blog remarks,

They are a solidly middle-class family, and their inner life is lived wholly in Bengali: not the least of Neel's achievements in this book is his

vivid and precise rendering of the textures, idioms and rhythms of the language in which his characters speak and write.

The electrifying book describes the Bengali family life filled with manipulation and oppression.

Lovelessness pervades the family of the Ghoshes like in the case of the family of Shyamanand in *The Last Burden*. Lack of genuine human relationship and increasingly unstable and interest-bound relations can be seen in both the families. All the members of the family lead an unhappy life like the citizens of India. Prafullanath, the patriarchal head of the family is rigid and authoritarian and he represents the rulers of the country. He is not kind and sensible enough to understand the emotions and dreams of his children. He does not allow his sons to pursue the careers of their choice which leaves them discontent. This discontentment reflects the dissatisfaction in different strata of Indian society. The worst affected people are obviously the women. Purnima, the wife of the second son Priyo describes the house as a prison. Chhaya, the only daughter of the family is rendered unmarriageable because of her cross-eye and lack of beauty. She experiences humiliation and she directs her frustration and anger towards anyone she comes across. Arunima, daughter of the third son Bholanath hates her mother Jayanti because her mother ensures Arunima does not get anything she desires. She develops frustration and fury at her mother. The author comments, “It seems to her nine-year-old mind that her mother had her so that she could have someone to punish, scold and thwart. And to stand between her and her father.” (14) She expresses her frustration in an essay written titled ‘A Day in the Life of My Mother’ at school. Similarly, Baishaki, daughter of Priyo has to be separated from her beloved Sobhan partly due to the craftiness of Chhaya and partly due to tradition that cannot tolerate the woman selecting the man of her choice. The Ghosh family is an embodiment of patriarchy which is evident from the treatment given to the widow Purba. Purba is the wife of their deceased son Somnath. The Indian elite have

tried to inculcate modernity without imbibing its true spirit. Subjugation and subordination of women, especially the widows, by patriarchal dominance is continued even in the so-called modern families. Purba is a victim of such patriarchal dominance. Ostracization of widows continues to prevail with impunity even after independence. Purba suffers a sense of loss as she loses her dignity. Her very presence is considered inauspicious. Such is the predicament of the widow in a 'modern' society. She faces hardships and a gloomy withdrawal from life. She is alienated by the family and it is disconcerting to see her in-laws' unconcern. Her tragedy is the tragedy of a typical widow who struggles to adapt to her new and complex situation. In spite of her hardships, she raises her son Sona as the triumphant survivor.

The protagonist of the novel is Prafullanath's grandson Supratik who is attracted towards naxalite ideology. He is the elder son of Adi and Sandhya. He represents the typical middle-class Bengali who is radicalized by the Maoist ideology and the struggle of Charu Mazumdar. His radicalization begins when he is a student of Presidency College. He is repulsed by the suffocating hypocrisies at home. The family and social conditions make him bitter and gloomy. Possibly, this discontent has led to his alienation and he attempts to overcome this by going exile. With a group of like-minded students, he slips into the Medinipur district with a hope to raise peasant revolution.

Through the family of the Ghoshes, Neel Mukherjee draws the attention of the readers to moral atrophy of the elite classes of India towards the downtrodden. Modernity tends to be alienating in India. When western education entered the country, it was believed that the fruits of education will benefit the common people. But in reality, the fruits are reaped by only a few and these privileged have neglected the disadvantaged sections of the society. The family of Prafullanath is a classic example of this apathy. The family members are so obsessed with money that "the goddess Lakshmi is stripped of her clothes after the puja and left naked throughout the year so that she couldn't run away." (29) They show little interest

in the abject poverty existing around them. This tendency is also evident in the character of Sandhya, Supratik's mother. While in *Mother of 1084* Sujata who loses her son in a police encounter, she tries to probe into the movement her son is involved in and empathizes it, Sandhya remains a bystander who is caught up in the chaos of the time. The novel touches many important historical moments like the Bengal famine of 1943, the partition of 1947 and the naxalite uprising of the late 1960s. With the changing political equations in the country, the family's fortunes go downslide. As a result of the Second World War, partition of the country and their insensitivity triggering angst among the poor, fine cracks have begun to spread through the shimmering surface of their lives. The ageing patriarch gradually loses his sway over the family which symbolises the rulers losing command over the nation. Patrick Gale rightly mentions,

The Ghosh household serves a Sethian narrative feast with dishes to spare, and yet it is arguably the novel's much harsher second strand which matters most to Mukherjee. Pursuing the rebel son, Supratik, on a career from 1960s Maoist idealism through brutal murders in the jungle, to scenes of police torture that had this reader sitting protectively on his hands, it is a graphic reminder that the bourgeois Indian culture Western readers so readily idealise is sustained at terrible human cost.

The title of the novel *The Lives of others* is suggestive of its central concern. In the epigraph the author quotes the lines from James Salter's *Light Years*: "How can we imagine what our lives should be without the illumination of the lives of others?" Thus the author urges us to reimagine our place among the lives of others. Set in post-independent and to some extent in colonial nation, the novel, which has been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2014, mixes the politics of nation and the politics of family. It is an outstanding novel where the characters are brought to life with great skill. It can be considered the voyage of a person

seeking his place he could call his own in the Indian society haunted by divisions that leave people stranded and separate from one another. The powerful portrayal of the degenerating joint family of the Ghoshes and the miserable living conditions of the poor make the novel a reflection of the fractured Indian society.

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